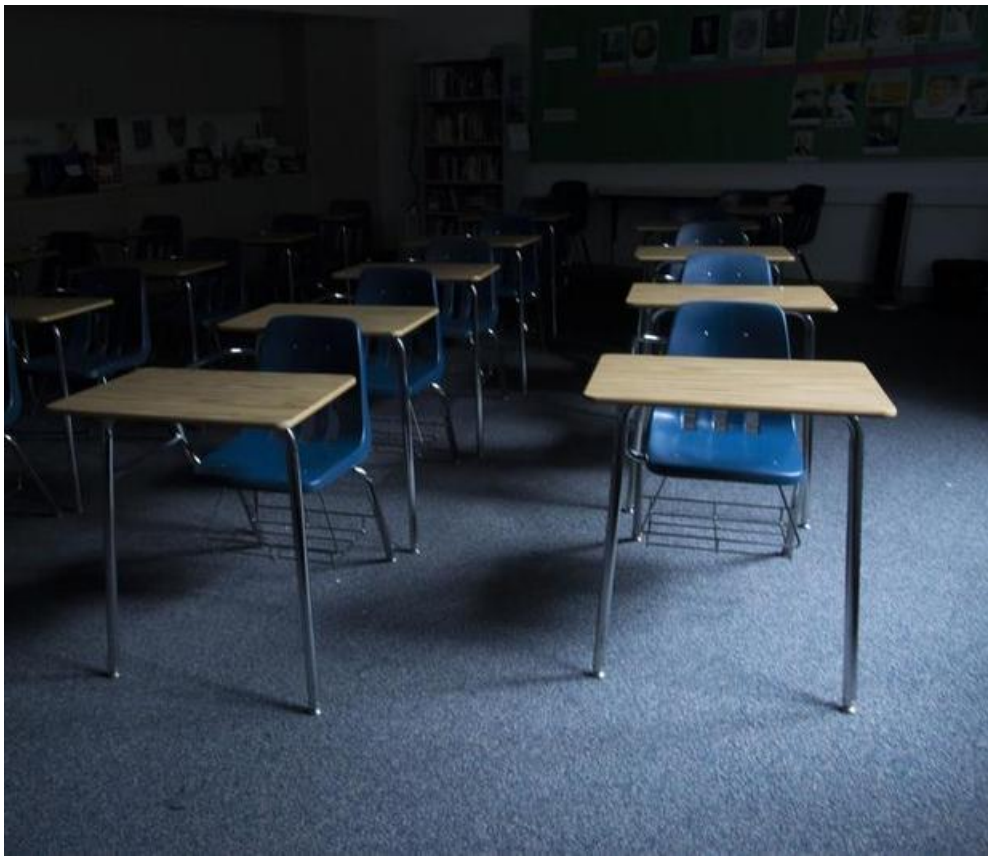


# Backers say class-size ballot measure is long overdue; foes say it distracts from Supreme Court mandate

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Backers say ballot measure that would lower class sizes is long overdue; foes say it distracts from Supreme Court mandate. LUI KIT WONG — Staff photographer

Too many kids. Not enough grown-ups.

Backers of state Initiative 1351 believe that's one of the fundamental problems in Washington's public schools.

They say their initiative, which will be on the Nov. 4 ballot, would solve the problem by establishing funding formulas aimed at lowering the average class size in every public school in the state.

“It’s pretty simple to me,” said State Superintendent of Public Instruction Randy Dorn, who supports the initiative. He believes I-1351 will have the greatest effect where it’s needed most: with struggling students who don’t receive the attention they need now.

Cut class sizes across the board, Dorn says, and high school graduation rates will improve.

But Jami Lund, a conservative education policy analyst, says the initiative will unleash a hiring bonanza for teachers and support staff — but guarantee little for students.

“All the initiative does is require the state to jam out more money for hiring,” Lund said. “It is just as clumsy and ineffective as it could be.”

The state Office of Financial Management estimates the initiative would add nearly 7,500 teachers statewide, and more than 17,000 other school employees, by the start of the 2018-19 school year.

I-1351 would increase state expenditures for education by \$4.7 billion during that period, OFM estimates.

The initiative would fund class sizes in kindergarten through grade three (K-3) at an average of 17 students; for higher grades (4-12), class size funding would provide for an average of 25 students.

Class size targets would be further reduced in high-poverty schools, where the average K-3 classroom would be whittled to 15 students, the average in fourth grade would be 22 and remaining grade level classes would average 23 students. There also would be reductions for career and technical education classes.

Some opponents are concerned that if I-1351 passes, it would disrupt broader efforts to fully fund basic education — efforts mandated by the Washington Supreme Court under the landmark McCleary decision in 2012. Last month, the justices found the state in contempt for lawmakers’ failure to develop an adequate education funding plan.

“We are looking ahead at the commitment the state has already made around increased education funding in response to McCleary,” said Dave Powell, director of the reform group Stand for Children Washington. “The question we want voters to be asking themselves is, ‘Where is the money going to come from?’ ”

But initiative supporters say lawmakers need a kick in the pants to finish the job they started.

“We have to keep the pressure on the Legislature,” Dorn said. “It’s a tough thing for them to figure out how to pay for it. But that’s what they signed up for.”

## TRY AND TRY AGAIN

Initiative 1351 is not the first appeal to Washington voters to reduce class size.

In 2000, they approved Initiative 728 by a nearly 72 percent majority. It provided state funding for a variety of strategies, including class-size reductions. But school districts were allowed to spend the money on other programs — everything from support for preschoolers to training for teachers.

The Legislature repeatedly suspended I-728 during the leanest budget years, then finally repealed it in 2012, saying that new legislation aimed at reducing class size and other reforms would replace it.

To comply with McCleary, the Legislature must fully fund reforms it has already adopted, such as lowering K-3 class sizes to no more than 17 students per teacher by the 2017-18 school year. Lawmakers did fund a fraction of this 2010 measure, targeting high-poverty schools first. But they have provided about one-tenth of the more than \$1 billion needed.

I-1351 backers say the Legislature's modest efforts don't go far enough. Their initiative would phase in funding formulas designed to reduce class size for all grade levels over the next four years.

The measure not only calls for hiring thousands more teachers, but also additional school counselors, psychologists, librarians, nurses, teachers aides and other support staff members.

Under its provisions, schools would receive state money based on staffing formulas tied to student enrollment.

In addition to more money for staff, it would trigger other parts of existing education funding statutes. One example: Local school districts would gain authority to increase their levy taxing authority. (Although from a practical perspective, they might not want to risk voters' wrath by asking for the maximum.) The Office of Financial Management estimates that if districts do exercise their full levy options under the initiative, it could generate up to an additional \$1.9 billion in local revenue from property taxes over the next five years.

Class Size Counts, which is sponsoring I-1351, bills itself as a statewide coalition of parents, teachers, school support staff and others supporting the initiative. Backers point out that the majority of those who gathered signatures in the drive to get I-1351 on the ballot were volunteers.

The campaign has raised nearly \$3 million, including more than \$200,000 of in-kind contributions, and spent \$1.5 million, according to Public Disclosure Commission records. Records show the state teachers union, the Washington Education Association, kicked in \$1.6 million, while its parent, the National Education Association, added just over \$1 million. The rest comes from local teachers union groups and other labor unions, including \$100,000 from the Public School Employees of Washington.

The I-1351 campaign website lists support from local school board members, individual superintendents and civic leaders. The Bellevue School Board and the Tacoma Council of PTA are both listed as supporters. The Tacoma School Board has not taken a position on the measure.

Lund said initiative opponents aren't raising money for their cause, but are relying on social media and volunteer power to spread their message. Lund works for the Freedom Foundation, a conservative Olympia think tank. But he said he's speaking out on his own against the initiative, and that the foundation is not involved in the campaign to defeat I-1351.

## MCCLEARY CASTS SHADOW

The McCleary decision deals with much more than class size.

Class size is just one of the components of what's considered the prototypical school model of funding. Other priorities include textbooks, library books, maintenance and supplies. Still other factors include full-day kindergarten, transportation and increased high school credits.

While I-351 includes suggested spending in many of these categories, opponents say the measure misses the big picture with its focus on class size.

Powell, of Stand for Children, said he opposes the initiative primarily for financial reasons. He worries that boosting education funding so heavily in such a short time will rob other needed services, such as higher education and social services, of needed dollars.

State Sen. Jeanne Kohl-Welles, D-Seattle, who is running for re-election, said she will personally vote against I-1351.

"I totally support the substance of I-1351 and have long supported and advocated for reduced class sizes," she said.

But she said she believes the initiative would tie legislators' hands as they grapple with the McCleary directive and also try to maintain adequate funding for early learning, higher education, mental health care and other essential services.

Fellow Seattle Democrat Rep. Reuven Carlyle said he opposes the initiative because it's too expensive — and unfunded.

"It compounds the financial problem we're having fully funding public education and critical services like foster youth, public safety and nursing homes while being saddled with an unfair, inefficient and special-interest written tax system," he said.

Opponents also argue the staffing levels mandated by the initiative go beyond those required by the McCleary decision.

Supporters say that's untrue. They say they used legislation already on the books, and reports from the state Quality Education Council — a panel created by the Legislature to work out new funding formulas — to come up with the numbers used in the initiative.

Dorn said I-1351's numbers are "very close to QEC recommendations."

Opponents are especially critical of one part of the initiative they say has the power to undo class-size reductions. The initiative says the formulas are "for allocation purposes only." According to an analysis by the state Attorney General's Office, this means that the initiative would let stand provisions of current law that give school districts discretion to maintain class sizes that differ from state allocations. Districts would retain that discretion under the initiative, according to the legal analysis.

Critics say this provision makes I-1351 a toothless tool that local districts would be able to skirt. But supporters say they don't want to box districts into a corner.

"There needs to be a certain amount of flexibility," said Mary Howes, campaign manager for Class Size Counts.

#### WHO WILL PAY?

Dorn says lawmakers need to come up with a new revenue stream to comply with the provisions of McCleary.

He says he has already told the union that I-1351's spending requirements "eat up capacity for (future) raises" for teachers.

"There are a lot of moving parts to this," he said. But he believes the initiative is the best mechanism "to put pressure on the Legislature to do something about class sizes."

Washington Education Association President Kim Mead said Washington is so far behind other states on class size, the initiative would still only put the state's public schools in the middle of the pack — from 47th to about 27th in the nation, according to the rankings published annually by the National Education Association.

"It's embarrassing to say that this will make us slightly below average," she said. "But it will still move us up and give our kids a better chance."

She said 21st-century classrooms aren't about having kids sit in rows of desks. Instead, kids are learning to explore their world with hands-on experiences and through online resources.

Mead said Washington needs to create an environment where there are enough adults so kids don't have to stand in line to get their questions answered.

She argues that I-1351 is worth the cost.

“We can’t afford not to do it,” she said. “Our kids have waited long enough.”

The initiative acknowledges that, even with added funding, some already crowded school districts will be unable to reduce class size. I-1351 allows districts that can document overcrowding to still receive the class-size reduction money. But they would have to spend it on employees that provide direct services to students. This could mean anything from two-teacher teams in large classrooms to more teachers’ aides.

## WILL IT WORK?

Buried in the rhetoric about dollars, school staffing and national rankings is the question of whether smaller class size will really make a big difference for students.

Research has been mixed. Some studies show kindergarten through third-grade students benefit the most from class-size reductions, as do minority kids in urban schools. Others say tutoring and direct instruction are more cost-effective.

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy reviewed 53 research studies that looked at test scores, high school graduation rates and other measures of success. In January 2013, the institute reported that reducing class size in the early grades was beneficial. But it said that in the upper grades, the costs could exceed benefits.

Initiative backers say some research supports across-the-board reductions. But beyond that, they say, cutting class size just makes sense.

“I don’t need research to tell me that it’s not a good idea for my son to be in an AP calculus class with 32 other students,” said Howes, a former teacher and mother of four. “Common sense tells us this is something all kids need and deserve.”

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